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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE SITUATION WITH REGARD TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECLARATION ON THE GRANTING OF INDEPENDENCE TO COLONIAL COUNTRIES AND PEOPLES

VERBATIM RECORD OF THE 1410th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Thursday, 30 July 1992, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. LOHIA (Papua New Guinea)

- Special Committee decision of 15 August 1991 concerning Puerto Rico (continued)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.25 p.m.

SPECIAL COMMITTEE DECISION OF 15 AUGUST 1991 CONCERNING PUERTO RICO (continued)

At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Martin Koppel (Socialist Workers Party) took a place at the Committee table.

The CHAIRMAN: I now call on Mr. Koppel.

Mr. KOPPEL (Socialist Workers Party) (interpretation from Spanish): I am speaking on behalf of the Socialist Workers Party of the United States and am accompanied by Mr. Edward Warren, candidate of the Socialist Workers Party for the post of United States Senator for the state of New York.

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas. Since then the great majority of the world's peoples have broken the chains of direct colonial domination and become independent nations. However, today, as has been so well documented by other speakers, Puerto Rico remains a colony. Indeed, in view of its population of 3.5 million people and those who have had to leave the country, Puerto Rico is the largest colony in the world. The struggle for Puerto Rico's self-determination and independence deserves the solid support of all the peoples of the world, including that of the United States.

The people of Puerto Rico is subject to the laws, courts, police and military authorities of the United States, over which they have no control. The United States Government - both the Democratic and the Republican Parties - is trying to depict Puerto Rico as an economic model for the world. But what is the reality?

(Mr. Koppel)

Puerto Rico has undergone an enormous social transformation since the Second World War. Previously a primarily agricultural country, it has become one of the most industrialized countries of the Caribbean. A large working class has developed there, concentrated in manufacturing and other industries. The workers of Puerto Rico today are therefore facing in more intense form the same basic problems as the workers of the United States and other countries: growing unemployment, wage cuts, deteriorating working conditions, attacks on trade unions and police violence. As a result, the struggle for self-determination in Puerto Rico is completely intertwined with the struggle of the working people against the social and economic conditions it faces. These conditions are exacerbated in Puerto Rico because of colonial domination, as has been detailed by other speakers here.

Nothing illustrates more graphically the colonial relationship between Washington and Puerto Rico than the recent revelations of this history of FBI and police repression of tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans. The hearings held a few months ago on the Cerro Maravilla case not only gave evidence of the role played by the FBI in the police murder of two pro-independence youths in 1978 and its subsequent cover-up; they also confirmed the existence of a death squad, headed by the chief United States Marshal and a Navy officer, which was used against political activists. The FBI was aware of this death squad for years but never put anyone on trial for the murders it committed.

(Mr. Koppel)

The hearings also included testimony to the effect that Puerto Rican police officials were trained in torture at the United States Army School of the Americas in Panama. The indignation of the Puerto Rican people at this political repression of independence advocates led a court recently to order the handing over of the massive files maintained by the police and the FBI on at least 135,000 people. This shows that the political police spied on and harassed independence advocates, trade unionists, students and many others.

Today more than 20 pro-independence Puerto Ricans are in United States jails because of their ideals.

In the United States, Puerto Ricans are treated as second-class citizens. Because they resist these conditions, Puerto Rican workers in the United States are among the most tenacious fighters for social justice. Protests by the New York Puerto Rican community against police brutality have set an example for all those fighting police violence. The support won by the 15 independentistas of Hartford among the working people of the United States has been clearly reflected in some of their most recent courtroom victories.

The workers' movement and workers of all nationalities in the United States gain by their unconditional opposition to the colonial subjugation of another people. United States workers and the people of Puerto Rico have a common enemy, common struggles and a common interest in solidarity and in the struggle against colonialism.

The working people in Puerto Rico and the United States are now facing a world whose leaders are drowning us in a world-wide economic depression and

(Mr. Koppel)

dragging us towards more wars like the slaughter in the Persian Gulf. As battles rage in the workers' movement - such as the present newspaper strike in Pittsburgh - and other struggles are waged by young people and workers against these conditions, a growing number of these fighters will be won over to the cause of Puerto Rican independence. Similar struggles elsewhere in our changing world are making millions of workers more supportive of the pro-independence struggle of Puerto Rico.

At the third meeting of the Sao Paulo Forum, held recently at Managua, the representatives of 43 organizations and political parties adopted a declaration supporting the right of the people of Puerto Rico to independence and demanding the closing of United States military bases in the island.

Cuba, Puerto Rico's sister nation in the Caribbean, has made an enormous contribution by explaining to the world how United States colonialism in Puerto Rico threatens the progress of all mankind. Cuba is testimony to the enormous advances in human and social rights that can be made when a people wins its full sovereignty.

As members know, the United States Government, from one Administration to the next, has systematically opposed United Nations efforts to examine the case of Puerto Rico and use its moral authority to support the nation's independence struggle. But none of its manoeuvres can hide the fact that Puerto Rico continues today to be a United States colony. The United Nations opposes colonialism.

Condemnation by this Committee of colonialism in Puerto Rico would inspire all those committed to the struggle proclaimed by the United Nations, which has declared the 1990s to be the International Decade for the Eradication

(Mr. Koppel)

of Colonialism. Wiping this shameful blemish from the face of the earth will benefit the people of Puerto Rico, the people of the United States and the peoples of the entire world.

Mr. Koppel withdrew.

At the invitation of the Chairman, Ms. Elsie Valdes Ramos (Puertorriqueños Pro Estadidad, Inc.) took a place at the Committee table.

The CHAIRMAN: I call on Ms. Valdes Ramos.

Ms. VALDES RAMOS (Puertorriqueños Pro Estadidad, Inc.) (interpretation from Spanish): I am Elsie Valdes, former Chairman of Puertorriqueños Pro Estadidad, Inc. As on several occasions in the past, I am here to request the Committee's help and cooperation in hastening the process of the decolonization of my people, the people of Puerto Rico, on behalf of pro-statehood groups that stand united in the face of Puerto Rico's uncertain status.

In less than 100 days the Puerto Rican electorate will go to the polls, as it does every four years, to elect a new Government. The contest will be between the Partido Popular Democratico, which favours the status quo, the Partido Nuevo Progresista, which favours statehood, and the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, which favours independence.

Although the general election will not directly resolve the problem of the island's political status, the Puerto Rican electorate will vote a mandate for one of the three parties to govern the colony for the next four years. A vote for the Partido Popular is a vote in favour of the position taken on 27 July by its gubernatorial candidate, that no move for a change in status will be made during the coming four years. A vote for Partido Nuevo Progresista, on the other hand, is a mandate to hold a referendum in 1993 to choose between Commonwealth status, statehood and independence.

(Ms. Valdes Ramos)

The pragmatic position taken by the Partido Popular's gubernatorial candidate has no historical justification. No colony in the past has chosen to postpone its decolonization indefinitely, until its most pressing economic and social problems were resolved. If such choices had been made, much of Africa would still be under the colonial yoke. One symptom of the colonized mentality is precisely its lack of ability to recognize the seriousness of the problem of colonialism and to give high priority to decolonization. The present Government party's anti-decolonization position is similar to the position once adopted by France with respect to Algeria or to the position adopted by any other imperial Power with respect to colonies it did not want to liberate.

As we approach the threshold of the new millennium, a millennium that should begin free of colonies, the Committee on decolonization should urge the political parties in Puerto Rico, and the ruling Partido Popular in particular, to include in their agenda for the next four years the solution of the problem of the political status of Puerto Rico.

(Ms. Valdes Ramos)

The elections of this coming 3 November are an important, although not decisive, event in our decolonization process. An appeal by this Committee, barely three months before that electoral event, would give significant encouragement to the decolonization cause and to those in each of the political groups we have referred to who are struggling to ensure that institutional attention will be given to the subject of decolonization. This Committee does not operate in a vacuum and should not ignore this historic opportunity to motivate our people, through the electoral process, to promote the cause of decolonization.

For me personally, it was so clear that the electoral process is the most effective tool for decolonizing my Puerto Rico that this year I have agreed to be a candidate for a political post. My candidature will enable me to help make the political campaign what I have always considered it to be - an educational process - and to win as many votes as possible for my party, which is firmly committed to holding a plebiscite between the three formulas next year. In that way I hope to shift my public-service aspirations from the classroom to City Hall.

I invite this Committee to reaffirm the urgency of the need for our people's decolonization and to urge that people to use its right to vote - a right that can be exercised only once every four years - this November to promote, not to restrain, the decolonization process, despite the determination of a party that does not wish at this time, since it is the governing party, to have a final definition of Puerto Rico's status arrived at in a discussion during the next few years. The Committee should recommend that the political parties in Puerto Rico should make a commitment to ensure that our final status can be defined as soon as possible. May God help us in that task.

Ms. Valdes Ramos withdrew.

At the invitation of the Chairman, Ms. Gloria Ortiz Viera (Puertorriqueños Pro Estadidad, Inc.) took a place at the Committee table.

The CHAIRMAN: I call on Ms. Ortiz Viera.

Ms. ORTIZ VIERA (Puertorriqueños Pro Estadidad, Inc.) (interpretation from Spanish): I am Gloria Ortiz Viera, a professor of nursing. I represent Puertorriqueños Pro Estadidad, Inc., a non-partisan entity dedicated to formulating and developing an educational programme for the people's orientation and participation, with the aim of promoting, disseminating and upholding statehood for Puerto Rico. We are appearing before the Committee for the seventh consecutive year in order to share with it our position on the definition of the political status of Puerto Rico.

Just a few days ago, our island celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the Commonwealth Constitution. In the course of those forty years the Constitution has undergone several amendments, which have not represented any progress with regard to the colonial or territorial political status of the island. The most recent referendum, concerning the misnamed "Act Guaranteeing Democratic Rights", was held on 8 December 1991 and resulted in the rejection of the Act by an overwhelming majority of Puerto Ricans. We believe that the political status of Puerto Rico is a matter that should and must be decided by our people.

It is our position that the people of Puerto Rico is ready to exercise its self-determination with the inclusion of the three trends in a plebiscite, by agreement with the Congress of the United States. We support the statement made last year in this Committee by our organization, which firmly and clearly presents our position with regard to the subject in question. We believe that the ideas contained in that statement remain valid.

(Ms. Ortiz Viera)

It is our belief that the time has come for this Committee to reassess its position regarding the self-determination of the people of Puerto Rico and to recognize in its final resolution this year the right of self-determination for the two decolonizing alternatives: statehood and independence.

Ms. Ortiz Viera withdrew.

At the invitation of the Chairman, Ms. Ana M. Lopez (National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and Political Prisoners) took a place at the Committee table.

The CHAIRMAN: I call on Ms. Lopez.

Ms. LOPEZ (National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and Political Prisoners) (interpretation from Spanish): My name is Ana Lopez. I am the coordinator of the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and Political Prisoners. With me is Nepher Rodriguez, another member of the National Committee.

Twelve years ago, on 4 April 1980, 11 of our comrades, men and women, fighters of the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional Puertorriqueñas, were arrested in Evanston, Illinois, and tried for common crimes. They have already served their sentences. Subsequently, they were tried by the federal Government on charges of seditious conspiracy and are today serving sentences ranging from 35 years to life for crimes which they never committed but merely considered, allegedly. In other words, they are prisoners because of their thoughts.

Three others were arrested on charges of seditious conspiracy in 1983, and at present they are also in prison. In 1985 a number of others were arrested in the so-called Hartford case. Altogether, there are 18 Puerto Rican political prisoners and prisoners of war jailed in the United States, in addition to 100 other political prisoners currently in jail.

(Ms. Lopez)

Even a cursory look at the situation will reveal that practically all of those in jail have served the minimum sentence required under United States law, but they remain prisoners. Furthermore, their most fundamental rights, guaranteed by the Geneva Convention on the treatment of political and social prisoners, are being violated.

They are imprisoned thousands of kilometres away from their homes, so as to discourage family visits, and many are held in solitary confinement for 23 to 24 hours a day, day after day, month after month, year after year. They are denied mail privileges; visits from their lawyers are made difficult; and they are harassed even in jail by orders of officials directly answerable to the executive office of the President of the United States.

(Ms. Lopez)

The National pro-Libertad Committee of Political and War Prisoners, which has been in existence for 12 years and which at an earlier stage, under a different name, headed the efforts to release Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners, has denounced these situations here as well as in other international forums.

We conducted a wide-ranging mobilization campaign that led to resolutions being brought before the United States Congress by Puerto Rican legislators. We arranged for meetings of officers elected by our community, at which resolutions were adopted calling for the freeing of prisoners held in Chicago and Boston; other resolutions are pending for prisoners held in Hartford, Boston and Philadelphia.

We have also mobilized our efforts in international forums. For instance, in 1990 in New York, we produced a long document that was distributed to this Committee in 1991 and to the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. We recently persuaded Amnesty International to investigate the treatment of Puerto Rican prisoners. We initiated and founded Offensiva 92 in Puerto Rico; it now has some 28 chapters in 28 cities. Thanks to our efforts, more and more churches are adopting our prisoners for purposes of exchanges between prisoners and parishioners. The National Committee also has chapters in the Midwestern and Eastern United States and in San Francisco, California, and 19 cities in Europe are working to help our patriots.

All these achievements demonstrate the love and support of the Puerto Rican people, as well as of other nations and peoples, for our jailed heroes.

But time and again we come up against the United States Government's wall of indifference and the terrible silence of the international community,

(Ms. Lopez)

which has the specific obligation to ensure the human rights of prisoners and the application of protocols I and II of the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war.

For this reason, we have once again come before this Committee to ask that it act in accordance with its earlier resolutions on this item and urge the Government of the United States to ensure the prompt release of Puerto Rican prisoners of war and political prisoners.

Ms. Lopez withdrew.

At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Rafael Soltero Peralta (Gran Logia Nacional de Puerto Rico) took a place at the Committee table.

The CHAIRMAN: I now call on Mr. Soltero Peralta.

Mr. SOLTERO PERALTA (interpretation from Spanish): My name is Rafael Soltero Peralta, and I represent the Gran Logia Nacional de Puerto Rico, a Masonic organization.

From 1965 to 1972 the Committee on decolonization exhaustively studied and considered the colonial case of Puerto Rico under United States rule. In 1972 this Committee officially confirmed that Puerto Rico has been a United States colony since 1898, in flagrant violation of international law. Therefore, the Government in Washington, D.C., should have withdrawn from our country all of its officials agents and instruments of power, which they continue to exercise over our land, air and adjacent seas.

In 1972, seeing that the imperial power of the United States was continuing to violate the rights and go against the best interests of our people, this Committee on decolonization adopted a resolution ratifying the colonial situation in Puerto Rico, ordering an immediate end to the exercise

(Mr. Soltero Peralta)

of all United States power in our country and warning the United States Government that if it did not comply the colonial case of Puerto Rico would be transferred to the General Assembly for consideration and adoption of the appropriate measures.

In the light of this threatening prospect, between 1989 and 1991 the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources adopted resolutions, and the House of Representatives adopted legislation aimed at carrying out a plebiscite of Puerto Rican voters with a view to decolonizing Puerto Rico by giving them the right to self-determination in accordance with international law.

The idea of thus consulting our voters had the approval of the leaders advocating, respectively, the three prevailing options in our country and was to be carried out under the personal supervision of Mr. J. Bennett Johnston, a United States Senator. Local authorities also cooperated, by enabling preliminary hearings to be held in the course of 1990, some of them in Puerto Rico and others in the capital of the United States, all presided over by Senator Johnston himself. These hearings were designed to achieve a prior consensus of the legislators and people at all political, economic, social and cultural levels in Puerto Rico on the status formulas to be included in the proposed plebiscite and the specific conditions for each possible winning formula. This consensus was necessary to ensure that the outcome of the direct consultation of the voters would be acceptable to both Governments. In Mr. Johnston's report regarding these hearings, it was alleged that the members of the United States Congress did not have adequate information on the political case of Puerto Rico. As a result, the law and the hearings were rendered null and void.

(Mr. Soltero Peralta)

To sum up, 28 years have elapsed since the beginning of this process without any progress having been made to solve the problem. In the meantime, the colonial Power continues to sack the colony, doing grave moral and material harm to the Puerto Ricans. So we must ask ourselves: can this Committee and existing international law, which the Committee and the General Assembly are supposed to enforce, force United States imperialism to acknowledge its obligation to decolonize the only colony left in the world?

(Mr. Soltero Peralta)

We also wonder whether it is possible that, after 500 years of colonialism, when the entire world is crying out for freedom, real social justice and universal brotherhood, in what can be called true democracy and real economic justice for all the peoples of the planet, Puerto Rico must be an exception to the indispensable rule meant to ensure that long-sought, lasting world peace.

The four recent summit meetings, which were organized and are taking effective action, promoting at full force the restructuring of the world needed to guarantee that long-sought, lasting world peace, constitute a determining factor that will be decisive in helping this Committee and the General Assembly to bring Puerto Rico without delay into the international community of free nations, without the chains that weigh it down, without the indignity that is the inevitable concomitant of slavery. Thus will Puerto Rico be able to contribute its talents and its full cooperation to the true creation and progress of that better world we all aspire to.

May the great architect of the universe enlighten and guide the members of this Committee on decolonization. We offer you our sincere gratitude for the invaluable service - of the highest judicial and moral standards and of unquestionable political, economic and cultural benefit - that you are rendering to all Puerto Ricans. Respectfully, the Gran Logia Nacional. The document is signed by Grand Master Jesus Torres Molla, former Master Aurelio Rogue Delgado and seven other members of the high leadership of the Gran Logia Nacional de Puerto Rico.

Mr. Soltero Peralta withdrew.

The CHAIRMAN: Would Mr. Zwickel, Mr. Colon, Miss Meneses and Miss Arjona be so kind as to identify themselves?

I see that they are not present, so we have heard the last speaker on this item.

With regard to this item, I wish to draw members' attention to the recommendation of the Open-ended Working Group, adopted at the 1401st meeting, on 1 June 1992, by which the Committee, having noted

"that regularly held elections in the United States and Puerto Rico may bring about new administrations holding their own views on the future political status of Puerto Rico, and that a dialogue in this respect could be renewed with a view to giving a new impetus towards reaching a mechanism for the definition of the future status of the Territory, the Working Group recommends that the Committee defer consideration of the question of Puerto Rico until 1993. It also suggests that requests for hearings be given due consideration by the Special Committee on the basis of its usual practice."

In keeping with that decision, does the Committee wish to defer consideration of the question to its 1993 session?

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 4.05 p.m.